

Comparative and International Education / Éducation Comparée et Internationale

Volume 44 | Issue 1

Article 7

June 2015

Book Review. The Rhizome of Blackness: A critical ethnography of Hip-Hop Culture, Language, Identity, and the Politics of Becoming.

Leigh-Anne Ingram

Educational Consultant, lingram99@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cie-eci>

Recommended Citation

Ingram, Leigh-Anne (2015) "Book Review. The Rhizome of Blackness: A critical ethnography of Hip-Hop Culture, Language, Identity, and the Politics of Becoming.," *Comparative and International Education / Éducation Comparée et Internationale*: Vol. 44: Iss. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cie-eci/vol44/iss1/7>

This Book review/Compte rendu is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative and International Education / Éducation Comparée et Internationale by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact jpater22@uwo.ca.

Book Review: The Rhizome of Blackness: A critical ethnography of Hip-Hop Culture, Language, Identity and the Politics of Becoming

Ibrahim, A. (2014). *The Rhizome of Blackness: A critical ethnography of Hip-Hop Culture, Language, Identity, and the Politics of Becoming*. New York: Peter Lang. ISBN 976-1-4331-2602-4.

Reviewed by Leigh-Anne Ingram, Educational Consultant

Against the backdrop of a neoliberal fixation on standardized assessments and results-based management, "*The rhizome of blackness: A critical ethnography of Hip-Hop culture, language, identity and the politics of becoming*" by CIESC member Awad Ibrahim, provides a much-needed reminder about the infinitely complex nature of Black identity in North America. With daily updates about tragic murders of Black youth in the U.S. and Canada, this examination of Blackness is timely. This book is not situated within mainstream comparative education, but provides a post-structuralist challenge to the functionalist paradigm that dominates much of the field. As Peggy McIntosh (1989) says, I must begin by "unpacking my own knapsack" by acknowledging my discomfort --as a White, Western woman--about reviewing a book which so incisively critiques the deeply problematic colonial construction of Blackness. Ibrahim begins with his own journey of "*becoming Black*", asking the question: "As a continental African living in North America, am I a Black man? How is one translating and negotiating one's own sense of self vis-à-vis the already pronounced, assembled social order?" (p. 5).

Ibrahim (2014) cites Deleuze and Guattari's metaphor of the rhizome, which is a plant that resists facile notions of linear and controlled movement along a continuum. It is fluid, multiple and in a constant state of flow and deterritorialization (p. 32). Over the course of three ethnographic projects, he worked French and English-speaking African immigrant and refugee youth living in Ontario, Canada, situating his methodology within the tradition of critical ethnography. Referring to Franz Fanon's notion of the "passionate researcher" (1963, p. 170), Ibrahim breaks with traditional ethnography and describes his research approach as a 'hanging out' methodology.

In the first chapter, Ibrahim theorizes the rhizomatic process of becoming Black, grounding his discussion in a complex web of theoretical traditions, including Homi Bhabha's notion of 'hybridity'. His analysis is both playful and multi-faceted, examining how a heteroglossia of Black identities become lumped together all the various ethnicities, languages, identities and cultures into one uni-dimensional category of "Black". He argues that this "assemblage" *must* be understood within the relations of power and hegemony that characterize North American society, where "Blackness" is constructed in a 'sub-altern' position within schooling, culture and society. We need a "project of hybridization" (Mercer, 1994) that connects Black youth to the rich heteroglossia of forms of Black cultures, languages, and identities that are complex, relational, transnational and global (p. 39). In my own research with young adolescent women in Canada, I similarly found that young women longed for more spaces to identify problematic constructions of female (and male) identity within a context of White masculinist schooling (Ingram, 2013).

In Chapter Two, Ibrahim describes the process of racialization that positions Black youth within the history of discrimination in Canada. He describes the three sites of ethnographic study where he worked with young people and teachers between 1996 and 2011. He uses the narratives of 18 Black youth, who are part of a francophone, anglophone and allophone African population in Ontario's English and French language schools, to provide an intersectional analysis of how race, gender, age and culture affect the daily experiences of Black youth. He takes up the issues of push-outs versus drop-outs, refugee students, and the interruption of schooling when students come from countries in conflict. Ibrahim is not doing a comparative analysis across sites, but is providing a more general discussion of key themes. Their stories are indeed compelling, but I found myself wanting to know more about these young people and about the social, political and historical context

of the three sites. After describing the striated spaces that Black youth inhabit, Chapter Three undertakes an examination of teachers, curriculum and pedagogy, showing how the youth question the dominant construction of knowledge, and the marginalization or complete exclusion of African, First Nations and non-European knowledge.

Ibrahim explores how youth inhabit a third space, where they exist in between cultures, languages, identities and belief systems. In this space, they can access 'lines of flight', or an infinite number of expressions through language learning, Hip-Hop, rap, and Black popular culture. Black youth easily switch from English to French to Somali, or from LL Cool J to reggae to Salt-N-Pepa. As someone who was born in Côte D'Ivoire and spent many years living in several countries in Africa, I too am often frustrated by the frequent classification of all things Africa into one monolithic category. I too believe that educators can and should help young people understand the intersections of race, culture, language, and geography through a study of Black popular culture. This project should be for all young people and should also go beyond the confines of Hip-Hop to include Afro-beat, Brazilian Samba, Caribbean Calypso and the myriad forms of Black culture that exist also outside the North American corporate media. If we propose Hip-Hop as the means for a project of diversification of Blackness, does it foreclose the possibilities of also learning about through the music of Bahia, through the works of Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie or through the political efforts of Liberian president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf?

Ibrahim concludes by proposing a pedagogy of the imaginary as integrative anti-racism, providing youth with myriad new forms that "affirm multiple black identities and varied black experiences (and also) challenge colonial imperialist paradigms of black identity" (hooks, 1990, p. 28). *The Rhizome of Blackness* adds to the postcolonial literature on identity and language learning, reminding us how Black youth must forsake their rhizomatic third space in order to fit into a society that erases their complex and diverse historical, social and political identities. This book provides important messages about the nature of identity and the social construction of knowledge, speaking to all educators who want Black and racialized youth to feel validated and be able to invent "lines of flight" for themselves and for our societies. How can we teach young people about rhizomatic complexity, fluidity and critical literacy within an education system that functions on stratification, classification and socialization into mainstream society?

References

- hooks, b. (1990). *Yearning race, gender and cultural politics*. Toronto, ON: Between the lines.
- Ingram, L. (2013). *Citizen-girls: Girls' perspectives on gender, citizenship and schooling*. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation. OISE/University of Toronto.
- Mercer, K. (1994). *Welcome to the jungle: New politics in Black cultural studies*. New York and London: Routledge.
- McIntosh, P. (1989). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. *Peace and Freedom*. Retrieved from <http://amptoons.com/blog/files/mcintosh.html>